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ABSTRACT

Recent research links intense (more than 20 hours per week) part-time employment of high school students with lower grade point averages. This study questions students' awareness of such findings. A sample of 446 college-oriented high school students who hold jobs in fast food restaurants were studied. The findings confirmed the negative relationship between intense work and grade point average. The results suggest that students who work do not perceive any effects of the job on their school work. Neither do they perceive any less approval from their parents, teachers and other school officials. Despite their intentions to go to college, some students receive endorsements of their intense work from school personnel. Responsible adults must change this practice. (VM)

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Graduate Institute for Policy Education and Research Working Paper

INTENSE EMPLOYMENT WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL: Are Teachers, Guidance Counselors, and Parents Misguiding Academically-Oriented Adolescents?

by

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Cynthia A. Rohrbeck
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1987-4

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
The George Washington University

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Milton M. Carrow
Editor

INTENSE EMPLOYMENT WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL:

Are Teachers, Guidance Counselors, and Parents Misguiding Academically-Oriented Adolescents?

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ABSTRACT

In view of recent research linking intense (i.e., more than 20 hours per week) part-time employment of high school students with lower grade point averages, an important question becomes whether high school students who specifically intend to attend college (and for whom, therefore, high grade point averages are important for reaching their educational goals) and work more than 20 hours/week are aware of the potential negative impact of this intensity of employment. Based on a random sample of 446 college-oriented high school students intending to attend college who hold fast food jobs, this study reinforced previous general findings of a negative relationship between working more than 20 hours per week and grade point average by focusing on those high school students specifically intending to attend college. Results, however, suggest that students who work more than 20 hours per week (like their peers who work fewer hours) do not perceive any effect of the job on their school work nor less approval from teachers, counselors/other school officials, or parents for working at this level of intensity, and work longer hours in part for both discretionary (e.g., to learn skills; because friends work here) and nondiscretionary (e.g., to help support their family) reasons. These data also suggest that, despite their intention to attend college, a number of lower-achieving high school students are receiving implicit endorsement (through special work-school scheduling arrangements) from school personnel to work more than 20 hours per week. Policy implications of these results are discussed.

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by

Philip W. Wirtz, Cynthia Rohrbeck, Ivan Charner, and Bryna Shore Fraser

The widely-held view that American high schools provide inadequate preparation for the transition of adolescents into adult roles (Illich, 1971; Goodman, 1971; National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, 1973; Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, 1974; National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, 1976) has led to increased national attention and to calls for the integration of youth into "real-world" roles (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1980; National Commission on Youth, 1980; Cole, 1980). At the same time, the proportion of teenagers who work part-time while attending high school, as well as the average number of hours they work, has reached an all-time high. More than 2.4 million high school students are employed part-time during the school year; nearly one-third of all 9th- and 10th-graders, and approximately 3 out of every 4 high school seniors hold part-time jobs, often earning more than $200 a month (Bachman, 1987, 1982; Young, 1985; Steinberg, 1982; Cole, 1981; Greenberger, Steinberg, Vaux, & McAuliffe, 1980; Steinberg & Greenberger, 1980; Barton & Fraser, 1978; Westcott, 1976). In view of the importance of the work-education question, and of the large number of American teenagers who are employed while in high school, recent research attention has focused on the costs and benefits associated with part-time employment

for adolescents during the school years (see Charner & Fraser, 1987, for a full review of empirical research on work-school relationships).

One fact consistently emerging from the work-school literature identifies a negative relationship among high school students between intense part-time employment and grade point average. In a study of working- and middle-class high school students in southern California enrolled in their first regular part-time job, Steinberg, Greenberger, Garduque, and McAuliffe (1982) found that 10th graders who worked more than 15 hours a week and 11th graders who worked more than 20 hours per week had significantly lower grades for that school year than students who worked less (see also Greenberger & Steinberg, 1981, 1986). Similarly, a study of Washington state high school students reported by Schill, McCartin, and Meyer (1985) found a negative relationship between working more than 20 hours per week and grade point average. D'Amico (1984), while not measuring grade point average directly, found a negative relationship among white students between amount of study time and percent of weeks worked in excess of 20 hours. Although some studies have failed to find any evidence of a relationship between hours worked and academic achievement (e.g., Hotchkiss, 1986; Mangum & Walsh, 1977; Straus & Holmberg, 1968), there is both indirect and direct evidence in the literature that working particularly long hours while in high school is negatively related to grade point average.

To some extent this negative relationship may reflect the self-selection of low-achievement students into the workplace in order to prepare for a formal transition to work after high school graduation (i.e., where grade point average is causally antecedent to working longer hours).

This explanation would not hold, however, for high school students intending to attend college: a low grade point average would not logically be expected to cause these students to work longer hours. To the extent that the same negative relationship holds for these students, working longer hours would be causally antecedent to grade point average. Since high school grade point average is an important factor both in terms of gaining admission to college and of gaining the academic skills necessary to compete and succeed in a college environment, it becomes important to understand the factors involved in the decision to work particularly long hours (with the possible concomitant reduction in grade point average) by students intending to attend college.

For this reason, the current analysis focused on five primary questions regarding employed high school students who intend to attend college: (1) do those who work more than 20 hours per week differ in grade point average from those working fewer hours; (2) do the two groups differ in their perception of the impact of employment on their school work; (3) do the two groups differ with regard to reasons for working; (4) do the two groups perceive differing levels of approval toward their work by teachers, counselors/other school officials, and parents; and (5) is grade point average used by school officials in the determination of whether or not to sanction (through endorsement of special work-school scheduling arrangements) working more than 20 hours per week. We hypothesized (1) that working more than 20 hours per week would be associated with lower grade point averages, (2) that students who worked more than 20 hours per week would be aware of the negative effect on school work, but (3) would feel under more obligation to do so (e.g., in order to help support the

family), (4) that teachers, counselors/other school officials, and parents would be perceived as less approving of work exceeding 20 hours per week, and (5) that school officials would be less likely to endorse employment exceeding 20 hours per week of those students intending to attend college who have lower grade point averages.

Because prior research has demonstrated a considerable diversity in the jobs held by high school students, the current effort concentrated on one particular industry -- the fast food industry -- in which adolescents frequently work part-time while in high school. Recent estimates have suggested that approximately 17% of all adolescents who work do so in fast food restaurants (Lewin-Epstein, 1981).

Method

Subjects

As part of a large nationwide study of hourly employees in fast-food occupations (Charner & Fraser, 1984), 446 high school students intending to attend college were randomly selected for the present analysis from the population of high school students employed by seven major fast food chains and for whom complete data on key analysis variables were available. In the larger study (from which these subjects were drawn), a random sample of hourly employees on the May or June 1982 payrolls of 279 fast food restaurants from seven companies was conducted; 59% of the sample was between 14 and 18 years old. In that study, three waves of mail-outs conducted during the fall of 1982 and the winter of 1983. They generated returned questionnaires from 4,660 respondents (66% response rate). A structured questionnaire assessed demographic characteristics, family background, educational attainment and plans, attitudes about work in

general and the fast food job in particular, facts and perceived effects regarding the current job, and future plans. Respondents had been guaranteed confidentiality and received $5 in exchange for a completed questionnaire.

The current study is based exclusively on the responses of 446 subjects from the larger study who identified themselves as currently enrolled in an academic track in high school and who reported that they "probably" or "definitely" will attend (or graduate from) a two- or four-year college or a post-baccalaureate program. For these students in particular, high grade point averages in high school are important in order to attain their future educational goals.

Although 62 of the respondents neglected to specify their sex, of the remaining 384, 40% were male and 60% were female. Eighty-six percent of the sample were white, and 8% were black. Nearly everyone in the sample was single (99%); the majority of sample members were in their junior (26%) or senior (69%) year of high school, and living with both a male and female parent/guardian (86%). Fifty eight percent of the fathers, and 50% of the mothers, of this sample of high school students had at least some college experience.

Measures

The following measures, all assessed as part of the larger study, were based on the findings of previous research.

Level of Intensity of Employment. Each respondent was classified into either an "intense employment" group (averaging more than 20 hours per week) or a "less-intense" group (fewer hours) according to the self-reported number of hours worked at their fast food job during an average

week. Although evidence exists that the danger point (in terms of lower grades, increased absence from school, decreased time spent on homework and studies, and decreased participation in extracurricular activities) may be lower than 20 hours per week for some underclassmen (Steinberg et. al, 1982; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1980, 1981, 1986), the conservative 20-hour figure was used to determine at-risk classification for all subjects in order to preserve consistency of interpretation across the analysis.

Academic Achievement. Respondents were assigned an academic achievement score between 1 and 9 based on the following classification scheme for their self-ascribed grade point average in high school: D (69 or below); C- (70-72); C (73-76); C+ (77-79); B- (80-82); B (83-86); B+ (87-89); A- (90-92); A (93-100).

Perceived Effects of the Job on School Work. Three questions, coded on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), reflected respondents' perceptions about the effects of the fast food job on their school work: "my job interferes with my school work"; "I actually do better in school now that I work here"; "I actually do worse in school now that I work here".

Reasons for Working. Respondents were asked to reflect how important ("not important", "somewhat important", "very important") they felt that each of the following reasons were for having their fast food job: family support; personal support; having money for other things; experience of working; parental urging; friends working at the same place; in order to learn skills; in order to save for future education.

Others' Views About Respondent Working. Based on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Disapprove" to "Approve"), respondents were asked how they

thought each of the following people felt about their working on the fast food job: mother (or female guardian); father (or male guardian); teachers; and school counselors or other school officials.

School Sanction of Work. Three questions provided an estimate of the extent to which students participate in fast food jobs with the formal sanction of the high school: "Do you make special scheduling arrangements with your school to work at your fast food job?" ("no" vs. "yes"); "do you get any kind of school credit for working on your job?" ("no", "yes, with no grade for it", "yes, with a grade for it"); and "does your manager (or other supervisor) provide your school with any kind of report on how well you do at work?" ("no" vs. "yes"). A preliminary analysis revealed that the infrequency of "yes" responses (less than 5% of the sample) on these last two variables made them highly unstable; as a result, the current analysis focused on the "special scheduling arrangement" variable as the primary indicator of school sanction of work.

Procedure

The hypothesis that those students intending to attend college who work more than 20 hours per week would reflect a mean grade point average lower than those working fewer hours was tested using a one-tailed t-test procedure. Using a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure, hypotheses were tested of no difference between the two groups on perceived impact of the job on school work; on each of the possible reasons for working listed above (e.g., family support, having money for other things, saving for education, etc.), and on perceived approval of the employment by teachers, counselors/other school officials, and parents. Finally, in order to test whether school officials use grade point average

in the determination of whether or not to sanction special work-school scheduling arrangements for students intending to attend college working more than 20 hours per week, grade point average was regressed on the dichotomous intensity-of-employment variable simultaneously with the special-scheduling-arrangements variable.

Results

Approximately 58% of those holding fast food jobs in this sample reported working more than 20 hours per week; the modal category (into which approximately 25% of the sample fell) was 20-25 hours, and 55% of the sample averaged between 15 and 29 hours per week of employment. As noted above, in view of previous research demonstrating a negative relationship between working more than 20 hours per week and a number of high school variables (including high school grade point average), the current sample was dichotomized into those who reported working more than 20 hours per week (the "high intensity" group, n=258) and all others (the "low intensity" group, n=188). The mean grade point average for this sample of 446 high school students intending to attend college was found to be between a "B" and "B+" ($\underline{M}$ = 6.61). As predicted, mean grade point average was found to be significantly lower among those who were employed more than 20 hours per week ($\underline{M}$ = 6.47) compared to for those working fewer hours ($\underline{M}$ = 6.81; $\underline{F}$ (1, 438) = 4.05, $\underline{p} < .05$).

Table 1 reflects the perceived impact on school work of being employed, the importance of alternative reasons for working, and the perceived attitudes of others toward the student's employment, separately by intensity of employment (more than 20 hours per week vs. fewer hours) and jointly. Contrary to our hypothesis, students working more than

Table 1

Reasons for and Perceptions about Working,

Total Sample and Separately by Level of Employment Intensity

	Total Sample (Means)	F[a]	Level of Employment Intensity: 20 or Less Hours (Means)	Level of Employment Intensity: More Than 20 Hours (Means)	F[b]
Importance of Working					
Have money for other things	0.83	1978.2[e]	0.81	0.84	0.52
Experience of working	0.43	198.2[e]	0.42	0.45	0.25
Support self	0.35	106.5[e]	0.25	0.42	6.18[d]
Save for future education	0.41	124.4[e]	0.36	0.44	1.17
Learn skills	0.11	10.5[d]	0.03	0.17	4.00[c]
Parents want it	-0.25	57.3[e]	-0.21	-0.27	0.79
Friends work here	-0.48	224.7[e]	-0.56	-0.42	5.07[c]
Help support family	-0.72	753.0[e]	-0.80	-0.65	8.43[e]
Perceived Impact of Working					
Job interferes with school work	-0.05	0.6	-0.09	-0.02	0.35
Do better in school now that I work	-0.57	133.2[e]	-0.62	-0.53	0.68

Do worse in					
school now that I work	-0.26	20.47[e]	-0.32	-0.22	0.76
Perceived Approval of Employment by Others					
Mother	1.12	485.3[e]	1.20	1.06	1.83
Father	1.04	310.7[e]	1.13	0.97	1.99
Teachers	-0.56	35.5[e]	-0.70	-0.46	1.53
Counselors and					
other school officials	-0.50	26.3[e]	-0.68	-0.36	2.60

[a] F under the hypothesis of a population mean of zero; df = 1, 445.

[b] F under the hypothesis of equal subpopulation means (those working more than 20 hours vs. those working fewer hours); df = 1, 444.

Wilks' Lambda = 0.09; $F(16,430)=283.3$, $p<.0001$.

[c] $p < .05$ [d] $p < .01$ [e] $p < .001$

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20 hours per week did not perceive the job as more negatively impacting their school work compared to those working fewer hours: both groups felt that the job did not interfere with school work (M=-0.02 vs. M=-0.09, respectively; both ns). However, some differences were observed in the importance attached to alternative reasons for working by the two groups: those working more than 20 hours/week attached significantly more importance to supporting themselves (M=0.42 vs. M=0.25, respectively; $F(1,444)$=6.18, $p<.01$), to learning skills (M=0.17 vs. M=0.03; $F(1,444)$=4.00, $p<.05$), to working because "friends work here" (M=-0.42 vs. M=-0.56; $F(1,444)$=5.07; $p<.05$), and, as hypothesized, to helping support their families (M=-0.65 vs. M=-0.80; $F(1,444)$=8.43, $p<.001$). Interestingly, teachers, counselors/other school officials, and parents were not perceived to be more approving of working 20 or fewer hours per week than of work exceeding 20 hours, although perceived approval of teachers and counselors/other school officials was generally low while parental approval was comparatively high.

The extent to which school officials sanction student employment through endorsement of special work-school scheduling arrangements is reflected in Table 2. Students intending to attend college who worked more than 20 hours per week reported a higher proportion of special scheduling arrangements (20%) than those working fewer hours (13%); however, these results are consistent with the possibility that school officials endorse employment exceeding 20 hours per week only when it has no apparent impact on school performance. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, this explanation appears untenable when grade point average is broken down by special scheduling arrangements and employment intensity, as is also

Table 2

Mean Grade Point Average, by Special Arrangements with School and Average Number of Hours Employed Per Week

	Average Number of Hours Employed Per Week		Total
	20 or Less Hours	More Than 20 Hours	Sample
No special arrangements with school			
Mean	6.86	6.61	6.72
N	162	204	366
Standard Error	0.13	0.11	0.08
Column Percent	87.1	80.0	
Special arrangements with school			
Mean	6.50	5.90	6.09
N	24	51	75
Standard Error	0.40	0.22	0.20
Column Percent	12.9	20.0	
Total Sample			
Mean	6.81	6.47	6.61
N	186	255	441[a]
Standard Error	0.12	0.10	0.08

[a]5 observations excluded due to item nonresponse.

presented in Table 2. Those reporting special work-school scheduling arrangements who averaged more than 20 hours per week on the job actually reflected the lowest grade point average (M=5.90); the highest grade point average was reflected by those who had not made special work-school scheduling arrangements and who averaged fewer employment hours (M=6.86). A multiple regression analysis of grade point average on (1) special scheduling arrangements with the school and (2) whether or not the student exceeded 20 hours per week employment on average revealed a significant main effect of the special scheduling arrangement variable ($F(1, 437) = 6.30$, $p<.01$) but not of level of employment intensity ($F(1, 437) = 1.37$, ns) or the interaction between the two ($F(1, 437) = 0.64$, ns).

Discussion

These results suggest that previous reports of a negative relationship between working more than 20 hours per week and grade point average extend to high school students intending to attend college, but that students who do work more than 20 hours per week (like their peers who work fewer hours) perceive no effect of the job on their school work, and perceive no less approval from teachers, counselors/other school officials, or parents for working at this level of intensity. Several reasons may partially account for the more intense work level: students in this sample who worked more than 20 hours per week attached significantly greater importance to helping to support the family, learning skills, and supporting themselves than those working fewer hours, as well as because "friends work here." Surprisingly, despite a higher proportion of special work-school scheduling arrangements among those working more than 20 hours per week compared to those working fewer hours, the mean grade point average of the high-

intensity employment, special scheduling group was found to be lower than any of the other three groups, suggesting that school officials may use grade point average in the determination of when to endorse high-intensity employment during the school years (i.e., as a surrogate for estimated future educational potential), even among students who intend to go to college.

Taken together, these findings suggest the disconcerting conclusion that responsible adults -- parents, teachers, counselors and other school officials -- have been either unwilling or unable to convey to adolescents who want to go to college the existence of a safe "upper bound" in the number of employment hours while attending high school. Employed high school students who intend to go to college apparently see parents as approving of their employment (no matter what the intensity); teachers, counselors, and other school officials -- while viewed generally as more disapproving of employment in general than parents -- are perceived as no less approving of high-intensity employment than of employment involving fewer hours. Furthermore, the salience of the negative relationship between grade point average and special scheduling arrangements by the school, even after controlling for differences in level of employment intensity, suggests that school officials may very well be directing low-achievement students who want to go to college into high-intensity employment, thereby significantly impeding any chance these students might have to attain their future educational goals.

It should be noted that all results presented here are based on self-report data, and are in need of replication using more objective measures; that the "at-risk" cutoff point used in the current analysis was

conservatively set at "more than 20 hours per week", and therefore these results may actually underestimate true effects; that the current analysis extends only to grade point average, and may or may not generalize to other high school academic outcome variables; and that the population studied in this analysis was confined to high school students intending to attend college who were employed in fast food jobs. The extent to which these results extend to other subgroups of the high school population or to other industries is a question worthy of further pursuit. Another question that needs to be addressed in subsequent research is the extent to which certain subgroups of the high school population are more "at-risk" for a negative impact of intense employment than others. Very little attention has been paid to this question: a notable exception lies in the work of Greenberger and Steinberg (1983), who found that male adolescents tend to work longer hours than their female counterparts. Finally, it should be noted that, while the two groups differ significantly on grade point average, the practical significance of this difference merits scrutiny. While academic performance was the only academic outcome variable assessed in this study, other research has shown relationships between work intensity and other outcome measures (such as participation in extracurricular activities, time spent on homework, etc.). To the extent that the findings of those studies extend to the population from which the current sample was drawn, the statistical significance of the grade point average difference in the current studies may well reflect differences on these other measures as well.

Although the argument has been convincingly made that part-time employment while in high school has a number of appealing features (Harrell

& Wirtz, 1979; Hamilton & Crouter, 1980; Steinberg et al., 1981; Work-Education Consortium, 1978), others have suggested that while modest levels of high school employment can instill proper work attitudes and habits, greater work involvements may interfere with educational progress without providing any obvious benefits (Greenberger, 1983). Student responses to the questions employed in this analysis seem to reflect a general acceptance of the benefits side of this equation by parents and (albeit, to a lesser extent) teachers, counselors, and other school officials. However, the results of this study suggest that it may be time for concern about "too much of a good thing," or at the very least, concern about <u>when</u> during the week the employment hours are put in. Clearly, students working more than 20 hours per week are doing so in part discretionarily, and with the sanction -- both implicit and explicit -- and sometimes the urging of responsible adults. In view of the documented downside (replicated here) of part-time employment exceeding 20 hours per week while attending high school, it would seem a propitious time for these same responsible adults to start applying the brakes.

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